

New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 16 | Issue 2

Article 5

3-21-2001

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Recommended Citation

Wingo, Ajume H. (2001) "Living Legitimacy: A New Approach to Good Government in Africa," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol16/iss2/5>

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Living Legitimacy

A New Approach to Good Government in Africa

Ajume H. Wingo

This article argues for the reorientation of African governments from a model that privileges the central or garrison states to one rooted in the living experiences of citizens, such as their economic conditions, fellowship associations, local governments, and community self-reliance. It begins by describing and analyzing in depth an example of a set of moral, political, and social institutions that still work well to make collective decisions that the members of the community consider legitimate and follow without coercion. It demonstrates that a legitimate government is not and should not be a matter of instituting finished, polished, or ready-made solutions or principles of governance abstracted from without the polity, but it should be a matter of inducting principles from the living experiences of citizens and using them to govern the citizens.

What Living Legitimacy Is

Living legitimacy refers to a system in which the institutions and the principles that govern citizens are derived from the way they conduct their lives and reflects their understanding of themselves. This inductive method builds on tradition, customs, and habits of the heart. Customs and traditions originate less from an intellectual process than general social conditions of the people and their environment. Living legitimacy materializes from the way people deal with the daily challenges of their lives by trial and error and how they arrive at their collective decisions. A political philosopher surveys the state of affairs about life that are considered sacred and uses it as a point of departure for theorizing about politics. The sacred involves long-standing disputes considered to be collectively resolved. The sacred is put aside to form the alphabet of social and political dealings in society. Failing to take the sacred into consideration, or worse, to overlook it, is like overlooking an integer in the world of mathematics. That is why political philosophers interested in genuine

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change have to appreciate and use the habits of the people as a point of departure. John Stuart Mill, an uncompromising Western liberal, in *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government*, insists:

When an institution, or a set of institutions, has the way prepared for it by the opinions, taste, and habits of the people, they are not only more easily induced to accept it, but will more easily learn, and will be, from the beginning, better disposed to do what is required of them both for the preservation of the institutions, and for bringing them into such actions as enables them to produce their best results. It would be a great mistake in any legislator not to shape his measures so as to take advantage of such preexisting habits and feelings when available... People are more easily induced to do, and to do more easily, what they are already used to; but people also learn to do things new to them. Familiarity is a great help.¹

Mill asserts that good government needs tradition as a pedagogical tool. A careful study of the history of Western institutions testifies succinctly that the founding documents of Great Britain, France, and even the United States are not as new as people make them out to be. They are built on rock-solid political traditions dating back to and even before the Magna Carta. The scriptural political traditions — even the enlightenment politic — of the West are carefully laid on the cabals of the Judeo-Christian traditions. I say this not as criticism of the Western political tradition but to point out some facts about the metamorphosis of Western political institutions and their reliance on the habits and traditions that came before them. I also point this out especially to those wayward Africans who see the Western political tradition as devoid of superstition and tradition, and worse, as a brand-new something to photocopy for African countries.

What Living Legitimacy Is Not

Contrast living legitimacy, which I claim is inductive, to the borrowed deductive or axiomatic system of governance that characterizes most African nations today. The principles of governance are distilled in the abstract and injected in the people. If and when citizens do not live up to the expectations of the axiomatic thinkers, it is quickly concluded that they are standing in the way of their development. People do not stand in the way of development; those principles and their advocates do. It is time to listen to the Africans who have shown again and again that the way they are governed is foreign to them. They have reason to complain, considering that it is almost near impossible today to have a government which is accountable to them. The so-called universal principles of governance are nothing but idiosyncratic excitements with local anthropological findings. Political theorists failed to appreciate history and localism. Having seeing ten million white ravens, they concluded that ravens are white. Or it works here, it works there; therefore, it should work in Africa. I do not deny the possibility of universal principles of governance. I say only that the database is too small to reach such a conclusion. Even ten trillion white ravens are not sufficient to conclude that all ravens are white. Should there be changes in African nations' ways of governance? Yes, but the changes must grow from people's understanding of themselves even as they appreciate the changes in other parts of the world. It is pure superstition and dim-wittedness to presume that African people

should live as if the world had known nothing until they arrived in it.

The Alphabet of African Political Philosophers

Most philosophers and political scientists always see what is not good about the age-old venerated accumulated experiences of the African people, but never what is good about them. The bounties of Africa are many: countless languages, diverse — extremely diverse — traditions and customs, multiethnic groupings, multiracial groupings, diverse political systems, humanist-based morality, unscripted cultures susceptible and accommodating of changes — more so than cabalistic cultures in the West and East; a communal system of life that leaves no one in the cold, extended as well as nuclear family systems, participatory communal decision-making processes, and colonialism and inherited Western political and social cultures. These are just a few of the resources in addition to the art and aesthetics that can act as the basic alphabet of political theorizing about good government by the wise, not the intelligent theorists.²

Beneath the Surface of Modern Africa

In 1972, the president of the newly independent Republic of Cameroon paid an official visit to Nso, a *Fondom*, loosely translated as kingdom in the North West Province of Cameroon. At the palace of Nso, the Fon, roughly the king, spoke to the president. According to Nso custom, the Fon speaks to ordinary people through a spokesperson-translator, who said, “Nso greets and welcomes you. Nso is doing well. Are your own people doing as well?” The spokesman, whether because he was clever or wise, willfully and deliberately misinterpreted the greeting thus: “His Royal Highness, the Fon of Nso, welcomes and greets His Excellency and says we are all Cameroonians.”

This interlocutory encounter among the president, the Fon, and the translator reflects the moral, social, and political problems Cameroon and, *mutatis mutandis*, most of sub-Saharan African countries face today and tomorrow. From this exchange we may ask the following pertinent questions:

1. What are the entities Nso and the Fon?
2. What are the entities Cameroon and the president?
3. Why did the Fon ask “Are your people doing as well?”
4. Why did the spokesman mistranslate “We are all Cameroonians”? What did the Fon mean by “Nso greets and welcomes you [the president]”? What is the nature of Nso, which can welcome and greet? The Fon’s words identify Nso as a person, but what kind of person? Nso amounts to an aggregate of individuals. Under this stricture, Nso is a figment of the forest. If what is real is the individual, one wonders why all the ballyhoo about Nso. Later I assert the reality of Nso. The description demonstrates that living legitimacy is always local and moral legitimacy.

Government as a Continuum: Humans and Persons

Growing up in Nso, I learned about myself as a finite and infinite individual. My late granduncle — *uncle* does not capture the depth of the familial relation — was named *Nyuy wir dze wir*, “a person’s God is a person.” The phrase simply means that an individual is an ultimate and supreme being. My uncle, an outgoing person, had a large family. A trader, he belonged to a tapestry of associations, and his life and identity seem to have been defined by those fretworks of relations. Very often, people told me — they still do when I visit Nso — Your uncle was a person *indeed*. The word *wir*, meaning person in *Lamnso*, like *onipa* in *Akan*, harbors an ambiguity. In one sense the word designates a human individual; in another, a human person. These are two different ideas: (1) An individual designates a basic moral worth; (2) a person refers to a more fully morally developed standard toward which we should strive; and (3) a person indeed means closer to real.

An individual is a finite living being who can be seen, heard, and touched because the entity is a concrete corporeal object of human seed. It is an atomistic and, to be hyperbolic, a windowless monad, a finite entity occupying space and time. This is the exogenous description of an individual.

Endogenously, a human individual is a spiritual and extended being. Lest the word *spiritual* sound mysterious, the individual embodies potential qualities for the unity of the self, development of the self, and a yearning for self-expression or, if you will, for meaning in life. In this respect the human individual is an intelligible, imaginative, psychological, and sensible being; one who embodies a quality the *Akan* of Ghana call *sunsum*. *Sunsum* is responsible for human personality. Kwasi Wiredu refers to it as the charisma principle. *Sunsum* can leave one’s body as in dreams, without its resulting in death. It is not unusual to hear someone say in *Lamnso*, the language of Nso people, “*Wune mahti mu; wune wiy ne mu bam* (My body left me; my body came back to me).

Wune in this sense depicts the personal quality or the metaphysical quality of the human which, like *sunsum*, can leave the body and return without resulting in death. Another example of this quality comes in expressions like “We are joining heads.” This phrase means that the wills and convictions of individuals are nested together by the *sunsum*. *Sunsum* is the quality in an individual that tends to propel him or her outward from the self toward other individuals. This quality is real and may shed light on the claim by spiritualists that an individual is a noncorporeal being as well. Once one takes seriously the metaphysical implications of the *sunsum*, one sees that this claim does not necessarily stem from the vague hinterlands of the human mind. The claim in most of sub-Saharan Africa regarding the reality of ancestors may also hinge on the noncorporeal conception of human individuals.

An individual is never less than a human being developmentally achieving human beingness.³ One is either human or not. Every human entity embodies a divine quality called *okra*, a spark or speck of the Supreme Being, a phrase that calls for clarification. It implies that the life quality or vital force *okra* is not bestowed on individuals by other individuals, groups of individuals, extra-human entities, or government agencies. *Okra* is a life principle whose presence means life and absence means death. *Okra* also has a normative interpretation and implication: it asserts the homogeneity and autonomy of each individual human. In this respect an individual is conceived as a sovereign, a supreme authority, and an autonomous source of moral claims. According to Wiredu:

An *onipa* [or human individual] is never less than a human being, and any progeny of

human parentage is an *onipa*. Akan hold that there is a divine element in the nature of all human beings. In virtue of that element [*okra*], absolutely everyone, regardless of race, gender, or achievement, is entitled to a certain degree of respect and consideration.⁴

Proverbial sayings abound both in Nso and in Akan societies, which reflect the normative interpretation and implication of the *okra*, such as, “Everyone is the child of God and none the child of earth.” Akan are likely to remind backsliders with the phrase *Onipa nua ne onipa* (“A human being is the sibling of a human being”); that is, all human beings are brothers and sisters.⁵ Yet an individual so conceived is not regarded as fully developed morally — or an individual *indeed*.

In Nso *individuality is not merely being but doing*. That is, the state of being and doing makes an individual whole, an individual indeed, a true individual. It matters what the individual is *doing* in a society of other individuals. A doing individual, a real individual, is a person, a performer in a community of other individuals. The being and doing conception of an individual is in sharp contrast with the post-Cartesian fantasy of individuals as beings who understand themselves independently of others and only independently contract relations with others. In the Nso understanding of the individual, there is no such thing as self-understanding apart from the constellations of other human beings, dead or alive. The Nso outlook is an antiatomistic form of self-identification.

A human individual, a spiritual being embodying the *okra*, the *sunsum*, and the desire for self-unity, self-development, and expression, is made whole or real by her or his obligations toward other individuals. When a person comes of age, after familial education, the Nso community considers him or her a person. As such, the individual can join the theater of life with the aim of realizing his or her well-being, self-expression, development, and the unity of the self. The word *person* reflects an autonomous individual as part of other individuals with interests and plans of life. Quite often an immoral person, or one who failed in his or her performance to meet the challenges of respect for the autonomy of others in the quest for living, is literally called *wir kisang*, meaning “empty person” or “not a person indeed.” On the other hand, a moral person or one who in her or his performance in life can meet the challenges of respect for others is described as a “real person,” “a true person,” or “a person indeed.” Words like *honor*, *valor*, *beauty*, *gallant*, are used to lionize the “real” person. Possession of the *okra* or autonomy of individual defines a condition of freedom for anyone as the unconditional obligation of respect of each to all and all to each *individual being* not just *individual doing*. Personhood obtains after the satisfaction of the first-order obligations toward individual being are matched by first-order rights. Second-order obligation is a desert and alluring desideratum. Second-order obligations apply to persons. Morality in this understanding has a built-in categorical force or motivation.

Personhood on the understanding of morality is something that people may possess in degrees. The more obligations one assumes toward others in the drama of life, the more of a person one becomes. Morality is in this case the meeting of obligations toward others. Against this background, one can begin to appreciate the depth of Ifeanyi Menkiti’s argument that “as far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail, at which they could be competent or ineffective, better or worse. For example:

In 1979, President Kaunda of Zambia gave high praise to [the] then Prime Minister of

Britain, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, for her unexpected constructiveness during the last series of negotiations that led to the termination of white minority rule in Zimbabwe. He said that she was “truly a person,” and he immediately provided a key to this choice of words. In Zambian language and culture, personhood is not an automatic quality of the human individual; it is something to be achieved, and the higher the achievement, the higher the credit. On this showing, the “Iron Lady” received very high marks indeed.⁶

Life in Nso is typified by the drama of personhood. The more obligations one assumes, the more of a person one becomes. The first obligation is marrying and having children. So important is producing children to personhood that in some neighboring regions of Nso, “ghost marriages” are performed; in cases of impotence, the family arranges an extramarital affair for the wife so the couple can have a child. The efflorescence of children in health, morality, and education adds to the credit of the parent, the lineage, and the community. The reverse — a proactive view of family, a family as doing, not merely being, is true.

A household full of lineage and extra-lineage members adds to the score. Celebratory and wholehearted participation in community affairs increase the marks. The “scoring” is local, and community members do the mental arithmetic. The following is an example from *Things Fall Apart* of checking the mental record against reality.

All this ant-hill activity was going smoothly when a sudden interruption came. It was a cry in the distance: *Oji odu achu iiji-o-o!* (The one that uses its tail to drive flies away!) Every woman immediately abandoned whatever she was doing and rushed out in the direction of the cry.

“We cannot all rush out like that, leaving what we are cooking to burn in the fire,” shouted Cheilo, the priestess. “Three or four of us should stay behind.”

“It is true,” said another woman. “We will allow three or four women to stay behind.”

Five women stayed behind to look after the cooking-pots, and all the rest rushed away to see the cow that had been let loose. When they saw it they drove it back to its owner, who at once paid the heavy fine which the village imposed on anyone whose cow was let loose on his neighbors’ crops. When the women had exacted the penalty they checked among themselves to see if any woman had failed to come out when the cry had been raised.

“Where is Mgbogo,” asked one of them.

“She is ill in bed,” said Mgbogo’s next-door neighbor. “She has *iba*.”

“The only other person is Udenkwo,” said another woman, “and her child is not twenty-eight days yet.”

Those women whom Obierika’s wife had not asked to help her with cooking returned to their homes, and the rest went back, in a body, to Obierika’s compound.

“Whose cow is it?” asked the women who had been allowed to stay behind.

“It was my husband’s,” said Ezelgagbo. “One of the young children had opened the gate of the cow-shed.”⁷

The story demonstrates everyone keeping an eye on everyone, collaborative dialogue to evaluate the facts and judicial decisions, and a production of scores (if Mgbogo and Udenkwo hadn’t had good excuses, their scores would have gone down).

Individuals who score high marks in the drama of personhood are acknowledged in the indigenous Nso government. The information travels to the palace and across Nso via fellowship associations, of which more below. The Fon and his advisers

react to high scores by bestowing titles on those individuals who through conscious moral carriage by design, not brute instinct of the hive, are able to meet the daily challenges of freedom in the quest for well-being. Once the society awards a title to an individual, that person is no longer addressed by her or his proper name. Those proper names become sacred, to be uttered only by their titled equals or those with higher titles. They are respected as community achievers and role models.

Negative scoring is equally quotidian in the Nso drama of personhood. While there is no limit to ascension, there is a limit to how far one can fall in personhood. One descends to the level of simply a human individual with basic unconditional moral obligations matched by unconditional rights. The fall ends there, because all individuals possess the *okra*, which dictates the limit of descent in personhood. A moral imperative in Nso, it is also a moral motivation for individuals to meet the daily moral obligations that make commingling possible, beautiful, and good.

Nso individuals have a mental moral script that says simply, "Your well-being is constrained by the sympathetic identification with the well-being of other equals like you." The quest for human individual development and the yearning for expression require the cooperation of other individuals. But life with other human beings also frustrates the satisfaction of individual desires by encouraging scarcity, even artificially. To the extent that an individual person respects other humans, the individual is free to pursue her well-being as much, as far, and as deeply as she wants. The questions are: What is the nature of the script? Who provides it? And how thick is it? The underlying Nso moral script is thin — very thin — compared with Judeo-Christian, Muslim, and other institutional religions, which have superhuman or extra-human entities as their authors. The latter have written for a group of individuals everything that was, is, and will be. Those of us in Nso were not fortunate enough to be visited by great messengers from the deity with a ready-made script. Ours is mundane, intelligible, secular, and elastic. This interpretation is corroborated by the fact that there are no indigenous institutional religions in Nso and in most of sub-Saharan Africa.

I again emphasize that the conception of an individual has a normative moral implication. An individual is supreme, autonomous, and entitled to moral obligations and rights comparable and compatible with those of other equals. That is, an individual is one who can exercise his or her moral freedom as she or he sees fit, subject only to the limit imposed by the recognition of an obligation of respect for other individuals as free and equal. This is the normative implication of the constitutive quality, the *okra*; and more important, the foundation of the humanistic morality that reigns in most of Africa and Nso and Akan societies. In pursuing one's interest, one is constrained and challenged by the realization that all other human beings embody the quality *okra* or the spark of the Supreme Being. *Okra* limits what each can do morally to other people in pursuit of their interests. Let me be clear about the word *interest*. I do not use it in the economic or narrow sense of mere individual preferences. Rather, I use it in the broader sense to encompass obligations toward other human beings. In pursuing one's desires, one ought to factor concern for other people into one's consideration. This is the humanistic foundation of morality. Wiredu defines morality as

The observance of rules for the harmonious adjustment of the individual interests to those of others. This observance is, of course, a minimal concept of morality. A richer concept of morality, one more pertinent to human flourishing, will have an essential

reference to that special kind of motivation called a sense of duty. Morality in this sense involves not just de facto conformity to the requirements of the harmony of interests, but conformity to those requirements that is inspired by imaginative and sympathetic identification with the interests of others even at the abridgement of one's own interest. This requirement is not a demand for supererogatory altruism, but a minimum of altruism is essential to the moral motivation. In this case morality is probably universal to all human societies, if not all individuals.⁸

Morality in Nso, as in Akan society, is strictly defined in human terms. The important implication of defining morality in terms of human interests, argues Wiredu, "is the independence of morality from religion in the outlook: what is good in general is what promotes human interests. Correspondingly, what is good in the more narrowly ethical sense is, by definition, what is conducive to the harmonization of those interests. Thus the will of God, not to mention the extra-human wills, is logically incapable of defining the good."⁹ God is too far from our particular human conditions. Therefore, the source of conflict in Nso stems from human moral errors, ills, and pursuing one's interests defined as preferences, or what one wants here and now, without an in-depth reflective and reflexive empathetic consideration of other moral beings of equal standing. This source of conflict is correctable. Another type of conflict, grand and incorrigible, is accommodated and managed in the lives of the Nso people.

Those who find the above description and normative implications of the concept of "person" bizarre may nonetheless still agree with me, once I amass the empirical data, on the ground. If one were to visit the "fictitious personality" called Nso, one would come face to face with individual human persons engaged in a drama of life as carpenters, lawyers, farmers, teachers, police constables, gendarmes, butchers, and so forth. At the central part of Kumbo, the political capital of Nso, one cannot help but notice arresting and enchantingly constructed gargantuan structures created by, and belonging to, various faith communities — Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Muslims. One also notices an attachment of compounds belonging to various families and lineages. Many primary and secondary schools, owned by individuals, faith communities, and the local government, abound in Nso. Young boys and girls attend them to learn.

Nso people also reside in the cities of Cameroon and abroad. They migrate for diverse reasons, some going afar to study, some having escaped prosecution by the government. I posit these crude observations to show that one can induct the centrality of the exercise of moral restraint and constraint as well as the desire of people to express themselves their own way, to develop themselves and preserve the unity of their being by observing what people are doing and not doing. Yearning for self-expression, development, and unity of the self are simply being by doing, and since a living individual cannot help but be and do, morality provides the stage in which a million flowers bloom.

The myriad activities in which various individuals commingle and coexist side by side, the omnipresence of autonomous lineages embodying different moral outlooks on life, the tapestry of faith communities, the ubiquitous fellowship associations all doing things their own way is, to say the least, what people are yearning for in life and what they take to be important in their lives: freedom, human fellowship. Nso's indigenous government supports institutional arrangements that facilitate the multiplicity of the people's aspirations, native talents, intrinsic joy of living together, and

a diverse culture to benefit all.

The structure of the main moral script is simple: empathetic identification with and recognition of all individuals of human seed as free, equal, sovereign, and as actors in the drama of life, their standing equal to that of everyone else. As long as the main script is followed, individuals, groups, and associations can improvise or issue their own scripts in relation to their economic and social contingencies.

The center of energy, the engine house of moral fire, is of course the individual, the precinct of moral feeling, psychological response, and desires. The heat of action lessens as one moves from the individual to the fellowship associations and the larger society. As a result, the vibrant and festive exercise of moral obligations is highest and strongest at the lineage level. It diminishes as one moves outward toward the one human family or the stoic's cosmopolis based on possession of the divine element *okra*.

Lineages and Individual Persons as a Continuum

Individual persons and family represent a continuum. Family in Nso is broadly conceived to include its lineage. Its members vary from tens to hundreds and even more. Members are connected by "blood principle," thought to be the closest extension of the individual by sharing close genetic materials. In Nso, it is considered as the necessary but insufficient base for the moral flourishing of family members, all engaged in the ends and means of their lives as they see fit. The family is structured to fire the imagination of members, foster a participatory attitude, and creates a sense of cohesion as well as empathetic impartiality among members.

A male lineage head leads the family; in large lineages a woman called *Yaa* assists him. The head is chosen by the older members of the family on the basis of his record in the art of good living. That consists of one's ability to meet the core moral obligations through calm ratiocination, prudence, and discretion while blossoming in successes — living well. One who acts from moral design, not merely as an automaton, earns high credits. A person who is blossoming morally displays an overt philosophy for all to inspect. In addition to an abundance of moral wealth, the material wealth of such a person would have been cultivated in broad daylight by the sweat of the person's brow without the assistance of extra-human forces.

The lineage head is elected by the elders endowed with wisdom, male and female alike. The leaders of neighborhood fellowship associations further verify the election. The Fon and his advisers, in consultation with the leaders, approve it ceremonially. A family lineage leadership position, like most such inherent positions, is viewed as shouldering a bundle of obligations rather than having and enjoying rights and authority. The term for instituting a leader is *gharr*, "grasping or compelling." It is customary for a would-be leader to be caught while trying to run away from the obligations. This, of course, is a ritual because many want the power associated with the position. Hands and hearts can get dirty; I mean nasty. Political power and influence are limited by potent means of intoxicating the bearer's moral outlook, which involves acquiring and keeping them. That is why the lineage structure is organized to choose virtuous leaders, not merely efficient persons or power-hungry wolves. Lineage leadership is held in tenure of good behavior and accountability. A person who occupies the position can be "washed" of his obligation or impeached if he misbehaves. Otherwise, it is a lifetime position.

Conflicts of interests within the lineage, which often arise, are settled at the lineage level. The disputants must first take their conflict to the family common space with a listening family audience. The next step is to engage a lineage man or woman, often a young person called *Ngwang*, the equivalent of a chief of protocol, who is chosen for his or her photographic memory. He or she listens to the case and briefs the lineage head and the elders. The head hears the conflict and passes judgment, which can be appealed to the court of elders who often consult with other lineage elders before delivering their verdict. If the disputants are not satisfied, the matter is reluctantly — very reluctantly — referred to the palace and, as a last resort, to the Nocturnal Council, the final arbiter. It is disgraceful and results in a loss of personhood points to refer frivolous matters to a village council, much less to the palace.

Every Nso lineage is recognized and identified by its public entertainment, which may be a dance or a series of dances punctuated with artworks unique to the particular lineage. These dances, arranged by immediate family members, are open to the public as a means of connecting lineages with the general public. Lineages also organize voluntary fellowship associations open to the public, to which members of other lineages may belong. When all the associations connect in Nso, they form a tight circle of organizations, becoming a source of vital information.

The lineage functions as a theater of moral education, engaging in face-to-face interaction with members who consider themselves united by blood principle or a familial genetic background. Passions are high, and members, especially children, are viewed as extensions of the family members. Wiredu insists:

The theater of moral upbringing is the home, at parents' feet and within the range of input from one's kin. The mechanism is precept, example, correction; and the process is life-long. Although upbringing belongs to the beginning of our earthly careers, the need for correction is an unending contingency in mortal lives . . . at all stages verbal lessons in morality are grounded in conceptual and empirical considerations about human well being.¹⁰

The core moral principle includes obligations to other members of the human race. This morality is solidified by local knowledge of various lineage climes and circumstances — their customs, narratives, forms of economic subsistence, and so on. The core conception is colored by local custom, traditions, etiquette, and taboos. These local pragmatic aspects of morality, subject to adaptation and compromise, change with time and place. Polygamy, a common practice in Nso and many other sections of Africa, is such a custom. Without attempting an in-depth analysis of polygamy, I say only that it is a product of circumstances and susceptible to adaptation, compromise, changing economic situations, and influences from other parts of the world. Similarly, for some good reasons, there is a taboo against farming on various days of the Nso eight-day calendar week. It appears that continual work with no rest, no time for the intrinsic joy of living together, no good attention to children or time for intimate relations including procreation, can be hazardous to core human affection, hinder calm deliberation, and turn people into automatons living to work rather than working to live. Nso encourages an ethic of hard work but only with a backdrop of understanding the need for rest and the enjoyment of socializing. The taboo resembles one of the Ten Commandments, Respect the Sabbath day. But this command is honored because God said so. Period. The Nso taboo is a thick, colorful complement to the Nso core moral imperative. It is particular, specific, and susceptible to

change.

The Expressive Sphere: Nso Fellowship Associations

Civil society in Africa can be almost meaningless, a formless, boundless concept with no light. I cast some luster on it by using the words *fellowship association* in place of civil society in the Nso and African context. Civil society in this case stresses the discontinuity between governmental and nongovernmental associations. I submit that no such sharp discontinuity exists in the native African framework, where individuals, communities, and the original states are continuous. In Nso, politics reflects rather than excludes the attachments and ideal of the good life.

Life in Nso is a drama of associations. The expressive free-for-all sphere, *Maanzi*, is not restricted to physical space but extended conceptually to the intellectual domain. The sphere is characterized by free and equal individuals freely bantering, forming, reforming, examining, and analyzing their opinions in a joyous and festive atmosphere of living together. It is based on the principle of human fellowship, the most vital of human values. This maxim is expressed in Lamnso in an adage even a child can evoke at the slightest provocation: *Wir dze wir bih wir*; “A person is a person because of a person.” It points to human fellowship as a garden for humanizing an individual yearning for self-expression, procuring the joy of living together, and individual intellectual development. Joy in communal living occurs in a polity when people organize themselves in a face-to-face relationship for the primary end of having fun as an end in itself or as an intrinsic value. It is the kind of good people would elect, not because they yearn for its consequences but because they delight in it for its own sake — starting with enjoyment and all the harmless pleasures that leave no after effect on people’s consciousness except the joy of human fellowship. The course of living rather than the impact on life is valued by the people. I describe the Nso associations with respect to their localism, their continuity with the individual, and their role in the living legitimacy of the state.

The expressive sphere properly described is an unofficial branch of government, a dominant incubator for public policies that is not political in the traditional understanding of the word.¹¹ The expressive sphere is inchoate, pumping influential information through a network of fellowship associations that end up molding positive law in the palace.

The associations are “fellowship” alliances precisely because they are driven by the value of human companionship. Emphasis is on the course of living rather than the impact on life. Human companionship causes geographically far-flung individuals to feel one another’s fate and empathize with people through their hearts and minds. Fellowship associations nurture humanity in recipient’s hearts as well as expanding the range of human development.

I classify fellowship associations according to their mode of formation. The first category is the familial fellowship associations, fashioned primarily by family and lineage members, who are divided into inner and outer circles. Genes and blood categorize members of the inner circles by ascription; the outer circle is open to everyone.

The associations have lives of their own that transcend the level of individual members. That is, the death or withdrawal of one member does not terminate the affiliation. It is believed to be a body composed of the ancestors, the living, and

progeny united by spirit and by a complex of carefully cultivated human imaginative and sentimental extensions of the selves into one whole. The whole becomes real and capable of justifying the ethics of an individual living and dying for the whole. Familial fellowship associations are referred to by proper names; indeed, they are treated as persons. For example, one can say in Lamnso: *Mekum*, which is the name of one organization, donates X amount toward the construction of the community house. The fellowship associations are not state concessions; they pre-date the state.

People who join the associations participate as free and equal individuals. They are entitled to take part, and others recognize their obligation to listen. Tête-à-têtes, bantering, and lively and festive discussions are primary means of living. In the expressive sphere of the associations, family matters as well as those relating to the entire society are hatched in the course of time. The associations prize the art of living together through socializing. The moral life of members in the wider community is an extension of a pattern of moral conduct developed and exercised in the associations. They encourage children to nurture the art of moral life as well as the sweetness and pleasures of human interaction. The associations are similar to the preparation of young child actors for the drama of life in Nso and the human community at large.

Other familial fellowship associations are gender based; they too are aimed primarily at the pleasure of living. Men and women are free to discuss issues of interest. The associations normally present free entertainment, which is open to anyone.

The next category is palaver associations or, as known in Nso, houses of discourse and news. Membership in these societies, which lie at the intersection of a junction of lineage familial fellowship associations, is purely voluntary. Members represent a hodgepodge of interwoven families, lineages, even trusted outsiders. They include people sharing similar desires in human fellowship and more. Most voluntary fellowship organizations have pecuniary interests in addition to the driving value of human companionship. Indeed, they are called *gwah* or *kitatih*, “contract” or “collective,” respectively.

A number of contracts among individuals form the monetary branch of the associations. In case of insolvency, members who contract in rotating credit and saving and thrift aspects of the associations are individually liable for debts incurred by all members. Financial transactions are primarily based on trust. Those who fail to contribute their share of a debt must face the powerful bar of Nso public opinion. Again, socialization is an important feature of these alliances. The financial aspect, often separated from socialization, is optional. Members are social and moral equals with equal obligations toward one another. Opinions affecting members and society are formed collectively, examined, and reflected upon in lively and festive discussions and human companionship.

The Fon and other community leaders must listen to ideas formed in the associations. That is, the public sphere is the place where the opinions of common people converge from a series of freely formed opinions. They are hatched and nurtured by individuals, debated collectively in an atmosphere punctuated with informal bantering, and elaborated upon by all to the wide-open ears of the Nso endemic state. Members of the associations include the palace officials who, on crossing the threshold of the association, must assume a personality common to that of everyone else in the meeting precincts. There even the elders are free to act stupid, frolic, and wallow in the pleasure of human companionship. This sphere of public discourse, out-

side the palace authority, is heard by the palace powerful but is not in itself an exercise of political strength beyond the association's precincts.

The self-help fellowship association is another category. These organizations are premised on a fundamental moral premise of life in Nso as well as in Akan society: a human being needs help. Wiredu observes:

The intent of this maxim, however, is not merely to observe a fact, but also to prescribe a line of conduct . . . a human being deserves or ought to be helped. This imperative is born of an acute sense of an essential dependency in the human condition. Dependency is, therefore, also a component of the Akan concept of a person. "A human being," says a noted Akan proverb, "is not a palm tree so as to be self-sufficient." . . . Indeed, at birth, a human being is not only not self-sufficient but also radically self-insufficient. The human person is totally dependent on others. In due course, through growth and acculturation, acquired skills and abilities reduce this dependency, but it can never be completely eliminated. What, in human affairs, is called self-reliance, is, of course, understood and recommended by the Akan, but its very possibility is predicated on the residue of human dependency. Human beings, therefore, all the time, in one way or another, directly or indirectly, need the help of their kind."¹²

Freedom-threatening problems, be they insolvency or natural disasters, call for help from the self-help associations. Small contributions from across the wider spectrum go a long way to release an individual or family from constraints on freedom. Bereavement is another problem that requires help in the form of contributions. Everyone contributes a share "by words, song, dance, and material resources."¹³ These groups are, of course, local and involved in face-to-face dealings.

On short notice, the members gather, bearing their own tools, to perform such societal duties as constructing bridges and roads and cleaning common spaces. They perform these activities with great enthusiasm, and those who drag their feet when summoned usually face the ever-watchful eyes and ears of the public. Perpetual absentees are shamed in songs in which they become the subject of laughter in their respective neighborhood associations and even beyond the ken of the neighborhood via the tight networks of associations to the wider society. They are referred to as "empty persons." Although reciprocity is encouraged, helping by itself is regarded as pleasurable and part of being human. In fact, one of the distressing moments in the life of a Nso is having consciously overlooked an obligation to help a human being in need to the extent of questioning themselves: What manner of person am I to walk away from a fellow human in need of help? Such self-examination can have a transforming effect on the questioner's life. Gaming or shirking is obviated not merely by the fear of facing public opinion but more by the fear of facing oneself.

Other notable Nso associations are faith communities, international organizations that are relatively new in Nso. These Christian and Muslim associations are quasi-Nso state concessions. The first Euro-American Christian missionaries and the first scouting Moslems from Northern Nigeria asked for permission from Nso, through the Fon, to establish their communities. After stating their faith-centered aims, they were given a generous amount of land in central locations to construct their churches and mosques. Basically, they established another personality acceptable to Nso because of its accord with the indigenous state's moral commitment. Their success in attracting members has depended on their attitudes of adaptation and compromise. They accepted members without requiring them to give up their customary personalities. Members of the faith communities belong to the tapestry of Nso organiza-

tions. They adopted church tradition from their fellowship associations, including spirited participation in church discussions and instituting such entertainments as singing and dancing and masquerade rituals in Muslim communities. Churches encouraged fellowship associations in their compounds. Festive masquerade rituals are performed by Muslim youths during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Similarly, such entertainments, which reflect local origin, are also permitted in churches as incentives to enthusiastic participation. Again, the personalities of the church and the mosque are different. Nso faith communities are viewed as additions to, rather than subtractions from, the complex moral layers of individual personalities.

Churches were attractive to women precisely because they encouraged monogamy and the joint attendance of husband and wife in church on Sundays. In addition to new marriage and birth rituals it introduced, the church provided new healing power. The churches transferred the illnesses hitherto blamed on family members and their extra-human forces to the devil and Christian gods far removed from human beings.

By extending to individuals the yearning for self-development and expression through the introduction of Europhones (English and French), Arabic, Hausa, and Fulani languages, the faith communities made a selection of language choices available to Nso. Addition of the literacy tradition is a significant contribution because the various faith communities boast a network of primary, secondary, and high schools in Nso. The American Southern Baptist and the Roman Catholic missions provide health services from their two centrally located Nso hospitals as well as health clinics in other sections of Nso. The Muslim communities own and operate local Islamic schools. Success in the mission of faith communities could be explained largely by their adaptation to the localism prevalent in Nso. The churches, schools, and health clinics, constructed and run by local members, are open to the public at large.

As noted previously, the expressive sphere is not limited to physical space, making nonphysical space available as well. Nso boasts four local newspapers, two in Lamnso and two in English, covering fellowship associations and news from the palace and wider society. Discussions that go far beyond physical space and face-to-face meetings are generated. Nso natives living abroad subscribe to the newspapers, some contributing to their ongoing debates.

The expressive sphere forms a relational net flung over discrete individuals, binding them one to another in the bonds of personal and impersonal confluence. The shadow cast by this type of association is what is properly referred to as Nso. In this vein, Nso is not the figment of a forest but a linkage of living individuals, an association of real persons under one living legitimate state. Nso, and the associations, are real; they have an internal system that allows them to grow like real human beings; they adapt, they compromise; they nourish themselves; and they change with time. The one thing they do not compromise is the thin inner core of Nso's conception of human individuals as equal and free. The Nso government is a continuous life drama of human individual persons, families, lineages, fellowship associations, communities, and the palace.

The Nso Government as Continuity of the Expressive Sphere

It is illuminating to describe the Nso government from two perspectives: the fellow-

ship associational perspective and the political perspective, both continuums.

The most visible day-to-day constituent of Nso government is the continuity of the expressive sphere in central palace locations. The *Ngwah kibuh* and *Ngwah Shinnkang* are two fellowship associations whose members are trusted most. Individual members also have multiple memberships in the myriad of other fellowship associations, especially those with good reputations. The Fon, his cabinet, and his advisers belong to both associations. The cabinet members are lineage heads who also hold political offices called *vibai ve-e Samba* or the seven cabinet members. The number seven reflects the original composition, but the actual number is larger. Some fellowship associational members are from the judiciary branch of the government called *a ta-a ntoh*, “the palace sage-elders.” The latter, the most trustworthy people in the Nso territory, members of the Nocturnal Council called *Nwerong vitzeeh*, are the supreme and ultimate voice of Nso. They hold membership in other well-known fellowship associations. Financial transactions like rotating credit are involved, but above all, the association is the continuation of the expressive sphere, which is free for everybody. Members from all over the Nso territory bring the concerns of the people and themselves for unofficial free debate and banter, making the sphere continuous with the government.

The second important branch of Nso government, which also boasts its own fellowship organization, is the *Nwerong* or men’s regulatory fellowship associations. Anthropologists refer to *Nwerong* as a secret society. It is made up of Nso people, separated from the Fon by at least five generations, who are mainly retainers of the Fon. The society has eight separate fellowship organizations divided into houses, each propelled and represented by a masquerade ritual. Members from the entire Nso territory belong to a tapestry of other associations besides that of the palace. They are inducted into the association on the basis of trust and a record of good conduct in their localities. Here, too, new ideas are initiated and public opinion examined and reexamined even as they chatter. Again, this represents the continuity of the free for everybody sphere in the palace.

The third branch is the *Ngiri* regulatory men’s fellowship association. Members, who are related to the Fon for up to four generations, boast more separate houses of fellowship organizations than the *Nwerong*. The various houses are organized around different masquerade rituals for the public’s entertainment. The *modus operandi* is the same as that of the *Nwerong*.

Fellowship organizations strictly for women are located in the palace. The three such main associations are *Laforlir*, *Kor*, and *Chong*. Another one, *Kong*, failed. Association members belong to a series of other organizations, and their discussions are animated. They also belong to other organizations outside the palace, where chitchat and serious discussions also take place. The discussions, mostly generated from the discourses of other associations, concern women and society.

The two *majong*, organizations, boast grand fellowship organizations. They meet once a week in Nso’s eight-day week calendar and run on almost the same format as those discussed above.

The Political Aspect of the Nso Palace

The families, the lineages, the communities, and the expressive spheres occupy most of the mental sphere of the Nso people, and the Nso palace occupies so little space

that one wonders at times if Nso is a state at all in the traditional understanding of the word. Nso people have a series of autonomous allegiances, of which the central authority is just one.

The Fon of Nso is the paramount political leader of the entire Nso people, who are diverse ethnically, culturally, and religiously. They include a series of sub-Fondoms incorporated into Nso at the outset through warfare. Even though they are autonomous entities, the sub-Fondoms are an integral part of Nso. They are organized on the same model except that some of them do not have the Ngiri regulatory societies. Some sub-Fondoms retain their languages while some languages died natural deaths. Members of the sub-Fondoms also speak Lamnso. The various sub-Fons rarely meet except to decide land or other disputes regarding large groups of people. Otherwise the sub-Fon pays regular friendly visits to the palace of Nso to share information. But when the paramount Fon dies, the Nwerong expects all the Fons to be represented at the Nso palace. Otherwise the sub-Fondoms are completely autonomous.

As hinted above, the Fon of Nso has a cabinet of about fourteen members, also known as *vibai ve-e Samba* or the cabinet of seven. These are the Fon's political appointees, well-established lineage heads who as cabinet members represent every Nso member. They hold regular meetings in the palace with or without the Fon to discuss affairs that matter to the society. They can be summoned to the palace at the Fon's request in case of such emergencies as war, land disputes, and natural calamities. Lineage heads hold meetings on matters regarding lineage groupings, including land disputes and witchcraft accusations as well as awarding titles to lineage heads and ordinary citizens. Such awards are strictly on merit.

The Fon is responsible for meeting foreign dignitaries, signing treaties, appointing women ambassadors to neighboring nations, and ensuring that all sons and daughters of Nso have a means of subsistence by guaranteeing justice in land disputes. Above all, the Fon is a commander in chief of the armed forces.

Nwerong Nocturnal Council: The Judiciary Branch of Nso Government

The real political power of Nso lies in the Nwerong palace, an autonomous sovereign branch of Nso government. The Fon and his cabinet members do not appoint the members. The Nwerong palace makes the law. Unlike the Fon, whose body is visible, the Nwerong body is not. Nwerong is impersonal according to the law or *nserr*. The Nwerong palace houses *Nwerong Vitzeeh*, the Nocturnal Council of sage-elders. The councilors are collective, an organic body with one heart, one mind, and one internal growth, referred to as such. Those who are eligible for election to the Nocturnal Council receive the utmost in education from the elders, beginning when they are as young as nine and spending nine years in the Nwerong palace. In the early days, training includes their fasting on certain days, which teaches them the prize of adroitness and courage. Sporadic beatings are administered to toughen them. For their entire tenure, they may leave the palace during the day, but only when masked. When they are older, armed with a good moral track record, they may be elected and initiated into the Nocturnal Council, where membership is for life. Council members are calm and detached from daily spirited palace scenes. They are the sorts of people who can distance themselves from ongoing states of

affairs and view them as outsiders to render impartial judgment. They are noted for their generosity with facts and austerity with judgments. Acting as a body, they deliberate at night, away from the Nso's daily noise.

A masquerader embodying Nwerong makes public announcements of new laws. Contrast with the Fon, who has a body and delivers speeches and announcements. But Nwerong communicates its finding as a body, a person, namely Nwerong. The council elects the Fon, but if he behaves unconstitutionally, the council impeaches him by turning its back on him. If and when that happens, the Fon voluntarily commits suicide. The council is the first body to inform the Nso of the Fon's death.

The following is the council's announcement of a Fon's death or "disappearance," as expressed in Nso: "oooohh Nso! eeeehh Nso! Nso listen and listen carefully! The sun of Nso has set, but before it rises tomorrow, sleep and sleep well!" This is an assurance from the Nwerong that Nso is intact even though the Fon's body is temporarily absent. Meanwhile, the Yaa or queen, not the queen mother, is seated on the throne until a new Fon is elected.

The criteria for Fon candidacy are straightforward: the new Fon must belong to a particular lineage and ought to have been born during his father's tenure as Fon. Children born prior to that term are not eligible for election for pragmatic reasons, the first being the educational factor for children born in power. The second is that once installed, the Fon must marry from a family called *Mtar Nso*, the "thirty Nso," a large Nso lineage group. They are detached people who belong neither to the Ngiri nor Nwerong or any palace associations and are also detached from palace politics. When Ngon Nso, the woman who founded Nso, left Tikar, where Nso originated, on the way to the present geographical location amid wars, her entourage came across the thirty people, a sincere and fair group. To incorporate them as Nso by genetics or blood, one married Ngon Nso, who gave birth to the first Fon of Nso. Since then, the tradition has been maintained. They remain the in-laws of the Fon. Their lineage heads are private, unofficial advisers to the Fon. When in doubt or suspicious of his cabinet members' counsel, the Fon seeks candid advice from his in-laws.

As another criterion, the person must be a common man struggling to make a living by meeting the daily challenges and duties of freedom. To be eligible for election as Fon, he should be a self-made-man who knows the suffering of the least worst-off person in the society. He should mingle with common people and continue to do so throughout his life prior to his election. Such a person is a member of a network of fellowship associations who should participate enthusiastically in societal affairs such as public works.

The election of the last Fon, a mere carpenter with a primary school education, came as a surprise to most people unfamiliar with the selection process. One of the candidates was a well-known established lawyer in Cameroon, who, intelligent Nso elites predicted mistakenly, would be elected by the elders. He was not chosen because Nso's political system is structured to value virtue over efficiency, wisdom over intelligence.

Installing the Fon involves complex rituals, ceremonies, and symbols. Because they are not employed on special occasions, they make the occasion special. The ritual involves taking an oath of office and swearing unconditional responsibility to the ancestors, the living, and the future generation as well as a ceremonial crossing of the sacrosanct spring from which all the former leaders drank water. Space does not allow a description of the complexity of the ritual, with which I have dealt in

some of my published work.¹⁴

The laws governing Nso arise from the belief in the constitution of a human individual as possessing the spark of the Supreme Being, deserving to be as free and equal as any other human being, with basic obligations matched by basic rights. The entity *wir* has the natural yearning for self-expression, development, and the desire to maintain the unity or integrity of their person or, apparently, what the political philosopher John Locke referred to as the desire for self-preservation. This core of Nso laws is epistemically accessible to all. The Nso government protects the society; ensures, for example, that everyone is entitled to a means of subsistence by settling land dispute cases. The rest of the laws are pragmatic living laws and include discretion, prudence, adaptation, and compromise.

Nwerong announces new laws in the central market square. Once proclaimed they sweep through all of Nso like wildfire in the Harmattan through the tight network of associations that transmit information faster than cyberspace. Because they are living laws, they are hardly news to any adult Nso. The laws are a result of collaborative efforts of individuals, lineages, fellowship associations, and the palace. Each has explicit or implicit inputs. The laws are normally coeval with public opinion.

The Ngiri Branch of Government

The Ngiri branch of the government plays an important official role in civic and moral education. Its masquerade rituals teach people how to be persons, actors in the drama of life. It teaches the art of meeting the challenges and constraints of freedom to express oneself amid titled others and the intrinsic pleasure of living together. The Nwerong association has its own masquerade but it is conservative. The Ngiri changes its entertainment in changing times. The many masquerade rituals depict plurality in society in contrast to the lineages normally identified with a single masquerade.

The Manjong Houses

Two palace military houses are charged with the defense of the entire nation. Echoing Locke, they ensure the preservation of the self. *Mfuh bah* is responsible for defense and *Mfuh Gham* for offense. Branches are located in heavily populated Nso areas. The reorganization of the military was the handiwork of Tamajong, a Fon of Nso, for whom they were named. He revolutionized the entire Nso government by his efforts. Prior to the revolution, the Fon was expected to be a “philosopher dog” — friendly to Nso, wild to strangers. This role was delegated to both military commanders and the field commanders, *a gwei*, all of whom must be fearless in the face of danger.

Once Nso was liberated from foreign invasion through its efficient war machine, the roles of Fons and the state changed. Deification of Fons softened and the role of the Nso state turned to securing the expressive sphere so the population could enjoy their yearning for self-expression and development rather than only self-preservation. The state, no longer organized like a military machine, and the two military houses emphasized their fellowship organization role more than their military role. The roles of the Fon and the palace were concentrated on the population’s social welfare and well-being.

Let me expound on the role of the state in preserving the body unity of its citi-

zens. Its prime role is clearly visible, even in modern liberal democratic countries, where the head of state is, first of all, commander in chief of the armed forces. This position and the organization of the state are clearly the source of the genesis of states. In its earlier conception, the desire for self-preservation was expressed in a limited contract between a warlord and his subjects. The expansion of this limited contract to include preparedness, as well as collecting taxes for the service, would have advanced the warlord to a position as a permanent protector, which his progeny inherited.

One need not look far to see how the desire for self-preservation inspires even modern theorists of states such as Thomas Hobbes's and John Locke's conceptions of nature as the point of departure for their theories of government. Locke envisaged nature as a state in which property was unsecured. For Hobbes, it was a space of "continuall feare, and danger of violent death," where "the life of man [was] solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short." Contrast this primitive conception of the origin of state with that of John Rawls's understanding of justice, using the hypothetical "original position" to generate an idea of justice as necessary. The mere preservation of the self is gone. About the mid-1800s, the Nso Fendom reached a point when the preservation of the self ceased to be the state's prime role. At this time, Nso flexed its muscles in international cola nut trade across the present northern Cameroon, Nigeria, and Sudan. Traders brought back money, commodities, stories, and fresh ideas.

Nso had its lion's share of wars aimed at the preservation of the self, fighting to their present location; they were particularly noted for their military organization. Nso was able to defend itself against the Germans in a surprise attack circa 1906. The Germans armed, with modern war machines, greatly damaged the Nso machine.¹⁵ The state's military dances are punctuated with songs recounting the uplifting and praiseworthy military history of the region.

Nso is not without political crisis; some of its constitutional disasters are worth mentioning. In 1978 there was a conflict between the Ngiri and the Nwerong fellowship associations. The Ngiri fellowship association challenged the Nwerong fellowship association's local monopsony over wearing *mbor*, a symbolic leaf perched on the head of selected actors during masquerade theater performances. Nso disputes are traditionally settled locally, first by elders of both parties, then, if necessary, by the intervention of the neutral Nocturnal Council. In this case the Nwerong fined the Fon for intervening improperly on behalf of the Ngiri, which represents his closest relatives. In addition, he was forced to offer a public apology to the Nso people.

More recently, a land dispute pitted the rights and obligations of the Nocturnal Council against the Fon and his cabinet.¹⁶ The former Fon of Nso had apparently sold the universal common land, the Nso land, to Catholic nuns. News of the sale reached the Nwerong, who accused the Fon of acting unconstitutionally. The Fon rested his case on the public good, but he died before it was settled. The land was then lawfully taken from the nuns with no compensation. Nwerong said the nuns should have known better, that they should have asked the Nso people. The land had been designated as the universal common land. Only the Nwerong could entrust the land to an institution, and for use only in promoting the public good. The nuns needed the land for a good reason — to expand the convent and the hospital — but they acted improperly by not consulting the right authorities.

In another case, the conflict arose from business malpractice.¹⁷ The Nso public

accused Mr. Mathias, who sold BBQ goat meat, of buying stolen goats from young people, thereby corrupting the youths. Fellowship associations, armed with a mountain of verifiable evidence, referred the matter to the Nocturnal Council because it was not a simple criminal case. Such a case would be referred to the neighborhood, to a lineage, or as a last resort, to the Fon and his cabinet. This was an issue of disrupting the culture and the beliefs of youths with respect to their place in society. Mr. Mathias was found guilty and subjected to exile from Nso territory on grounds of unlawfully toying with property and people's means of subsistence. He left. Early one morning a passerby spotted the exiled man at the residence of Mforme, the commander with one of the highest titles of the land. The exiled man allegedly asked for Mforme's assistance in appealing his case. The Nso public accused Mforme of tampering with the supreme justice of the land by looking for loopholes in the system. Because Mforme was a butcher by trade, his accusation was amplified by a conflict of interest. As a consequence, Mforme received a ten-year suspension from official obligations and rights. His associates, titled men, were also punished for not using their office to inform the authorities. Exile is an old Nso punishment. Long ago, the state abolished capital punishment and instituted exile to a place at the corridor of our Bamoum neighbors, *Kiyong Nzen* or *kutupit*, "stupid."

Linking Nso Indigenous Society to Living Legitimacy

The conceptions of the self, moral systems, and associational life of Nso are linked to legitimate government in five ways. One must first understand the Nso concept of individuality to understand living legitimacy. Individuals have *high stakes in harmonious relations* because they regard them as intrinsic pleasures and a source of their development. As I have demonstrated, the lineage and expressive spheres are avenues for *joy in living together*, self-expression, and self-development. The indigenous political system is legitimate to the extent that it is structured to enhance the delight in living together that individuals extol. The Nso palace itself harbors a center of fellowship associations, of which all leaders, from the paramount ruler through his cabinet and members of the Nocturnal Council to the lineage heads, are willing members. The indigenous polity is built up by the individuals developed within these associations.

Second, the moral point system described here is also linked to legitimacy in the indigenous Nso government. Morality is about individual obligations toward others in their pursuit of well-being, not about negative psychological release from obligation but positive interstices into obligations and values. Individuals are regarded as equal in all their diversity. Persons are not equal. Morality is translated into the drama of achieving personhood with its accompanying credit and debit system of moral accountability. The moral evaluation devices of the community are not purely subjective; they derive from ongoing, indeed daily, informal processes of deliberation and mutual evaluation. The ensuing credit and debit system provides a generally acceptable *ready-made measure* of moral evaluation when the time comes to choose leaders at all levels. Only those with high moral scores are candidates for leadership positions, although the scoring system is open to all members.

Third, the moral point system also provides an *ongoing form of accountability* for existing leaders, who must continue scoring. Since leadership positions are held on

tenure of good behavior, leaders must continue to account for their actions and inactions. It is common knowledge that good leaders must act in broad daylight for all to see — the external condition of accountability. The internal condition of accountability is self-reflectivity. One of the most distressing — and I mean agonizing — moments in the life of a leader, or indeed anyone in Nso, as in Akan society, come when a person who has acted morally irresponsible toward others asks himself or herself, Am I ever going to become a person [indeed]? This is a supreme moment of self-questioning that, in some cases, can have a transforming effect.¹⁸ Like other individuals, leaders are constantly concerned with their obligations and accountability of their actions to the people. The ethics of scoring provide an avenue to internal peace with oneself and external peace with others. Thus, morality goes beyond the ideals of “What ought I/we to do?” and “What manner of person am I?”

Fourth, Nso fellowship associations provide legitimacy for the indigenous government. Most of them originate through voluntary undertakings by individuals. As they derive from and encourage the joys of living together, the associations map continuity from the level of individuals, families, and lineages all the way to the level of the palace. Any map of these associations is dense. As previously noted, they are regarded in Nso as *another branch of the government*. They provide avenues for spirited and festive participation in, and influence on, collective decision making at the palace. The associations are also avenues for real information from the people, which affects policymaking and lawmaking in the indigenous government. The policies and laws that public officials debate in the palace are developed at the association level.

Fifth, *rituals, ceremonies, and ancestral invocations* serve to keep leaders faithful and accountable to the people. The leaders must swear to their ancestors never to act irresponsibly, which creates a point of self-reflection that can inspire a wayward leader to ask What manner of person am I that will betray my ancestors? Through weekly, monthly, and annual sacrosanct rituals honoring the ancestors, leaders are constantly reminded of their oath of office. The past guards the present and the future. Note that only those who score high moral points during their lifetimes have tickets to be ancestors. Policies that concern future generations rely on accountability to ancestors.

This system of legitimacy has its problems, one being scale. In a small society like Nso, where face-to-face relationship is quotidian, the joy of living together can create a major incentive for compromise and innovative solutions to potential conflicts. But in a large-scale society the pleasure of living together can be elusive. Nevertheless, despite all the shortcomings of scale, trying to encourage members of the polity to experience the joy of *neighborhood* with the other members can be a legitimate and healthy exercise. Such exercise can lead to creativity that over time might incorporate the joy of living together into the polity on a larger scale. Practice over the years can transform such joys into one of the pillars of living legitimacy. After all, the joy of living together begins as a local affair, but it can reach across continents.

A second problem involves instituting human harmony as an overriding goal. In a polity like Nso, where human harmony is such a goal, unavoidable human conflicts are sometimes wrongly blamed on the activities of individuals or groups of individuals and their extra-human companions. Some conflicts, especially those which are of large scale and persist must be acknowledged, accepted, and accommodated.

Other conflicts can be solved through a search for a common interest. Perpetual conflicts in Nso are sometimes collapsed into an overarching framework that assumes a common interest. Then, as these problems reemerge, they are blamed on the activities of individuals. The Nso people's insistence on harmony for chronic problems when no genuine agreement is to be found can exacerbate quarrels that spiral to an intractable war.

These problems, however, are not inseparable. A central future task must be to find ways of building joy in living together into larger-scale polities. Another task must be to find ways, compatible with indigenous African traditions, of accepting ongoing political, economic, and ideological conflict as part of a more full-throated and many-noted harmony. In working toward solutions to these problems, the people of Nso, and comparable peoples elsewhere in Africa, can draw upon a concept of individuality centered on life with others, a moral accountability that is externally and internally ongoing, a dynamic associational life that serves as a conduit for information, a deliberation base for moral scoring, and a rich heritage of ritual and ceremony that anchor each individual — particularly each leader — to the best values of the past and responsibility for the future.

The overall goal is to create a framework of living legitimacy in which political legitimacy in its normative sense is not tied to any particular set of institutions or documents but can adapt, building on existing social practices and underlying principles, to changing environments. Such a process of good government must begin on the ground and build upward. The laws must be living laws. Good government must preserve a diversity of institutions both to ensure opportunities for human flourishing and to serve as a base for living legitimate government.✽

I wish to thank Professor Jane Mansbridge with whom I have been working on this essay and a larger project on African democracy. This article was presented at the forum on Africa organized by the Center for Democracy and Development and the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Massachusetts Boston, the Institute on Race and Social Division at Boston University, the African Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin Madison, and the Committee on African Studies at Harvard University.

Notes

1. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government* (London: Everyman's Library, 1910), 180–181. The concept of civil society closely associated with nongovernmental organizations is a new phenomenon in indigenous societies. I think it is wrong to characterize fellowship associations in indigenous societies as nongovernmental. Yes, there are nongovernmental associations of both African and foreign influence but they have little or no connection with the organizations I describe as fellowship associations. The latter are untapped virgin human resources in indigenous societies.
2. Jane Mansbridge, the Adams professor of political leadership and democratic values at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and I have been preparing this project for a conference on reorienting the direction of democracy in Africa.
3. Kwasi Wiredu, "The African Concept of Personhood," in *African-American Perspectives on Biomedical Ethics*, edited by Harley E. Flack and Edmund D. Pellegrino (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 105–106.
4. *Ibid.*, 112.

5. Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, "Personhood and Community in African Traditional Thought," in Richard A. Wright, ed., *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: University Press of America, 1984), 173.
6. Wiredu, "The African Concept of Personhood," 104.
7. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1996), 81.
8. Wiredu, "The African Concept of Personhood," 80.
9. *Ibid.*, 81.
10. *Ibid.*, 82–83.
11. In Europe, media are sometimes called the fourth estate, and in the United States, the fourth branch of government.
12. Wiredu, "The African Concept of Personhood," 88–89.
13. *Ibid.*, 92.
14. See, for example, Ajume H. Wingo, "Good Government Is Accountability," in Tedros Kiros, ed., *Explorations in Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
15. See *ibid.* for newspaper coverage and details of the conflict.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. Wiredu, "The African Concept of Personhood," 108.

